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QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE CENTRAL AND EAST-EUROPEAN COUNTRIES AFTER EU ENLARGEMENT (2004)

Ioan HORGA, Diana GAL***

The present analysis has been inspired by the book entitled *The Quality Assurance in Higher Education in the Central and East-European Countries – Agenda Ahead*, edited by Jan KOHOUTEK, UNESCO-CEPES, *Studies on Higher Education*, Bucharest, 2009, presenting the outcome of the Research Plan *Tertiary Education in the Knowledge Society* (identification code MSM0023775201) of the Centre for Higher Education Studies, Prague, Czech Republic, and the attempts to show the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) at the level of the quality assurance agencies in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time, the volume on *Accreditation and Evaluation in the European Higher Education Area* edited by Stephanie Schwarz and Don F. Westerheijden and published in 2004, has allowed a more consistent pondering on the development of *Quality Assurance* in Central and Eastern European countries.

Analysing the precedents of the process of *Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* in Central and Eastern Europe moulded by the post-communist experience of higher education quality and marked by the American model of assessment and accreditation, particularly in Hungary and Romania, as well as by the British model in the Baltic states, Jan Kohoutek sees the quality of answers provided by the process of implementing ESG in a natural continuity axis (J. Kohoutek, 2009). In Central and Eastern Europe, it starts from the pre-Bologna previous experience to assure quality considered as a first generation one, certain advantages in practising ESG implementation practice, and from a certain regional interoperability provided by the *Network of Central and Eastern European Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education* (CEEN), established in 2002, as well as practice diversity belonging to the process dynamics to assure the quality of higher education.

Moreover, by a systematic assessment of the importance of certain factors by both the appearance of *assuring* quality as a political issue, *as well as* in expressing a special policy in the field, the conceptual framework can provide fruitful perspectives *through* transnational differences and resemblances. Jan Kohoutek says that “whether CEE accreditation schemes will remain “first generation”, or if (and when) they will evolve towards a second-generation approach with mutual recognition of agencies’ practices that are up and running is hard to predict, given the absence of a generally valid pattern” (J. Kohoutek, 2009: 48).

Developing the idea of ESG implementation appurtenance to the general phenomenon of implementation, we have to state that implementation supposes two distinct notions: implementation as a process (execution policy) and implementation as a result. Moreover, the two distinct notions lead to different qualities: responsibility, which is at the core of the relation between objectives and results, and confidence characteristic of the carried out policy (process of implementation).

The process of QA assessment in Central and Eastern Europe goes from a quality control system using tools belonging to the centralised state to an assessment of quality

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assurance based on democratic principles. At the beginning of the 1990s, the reform propositions offered by foreign experts were based on implicit assumptions that they had sufficient knowledge of the country's transformation specifics, on the possibility of attaining consensus on "the quality issue", on how it should be solved, and by what methodology. The foreign experts may have been proposing solutions of the theoretical and rational planning type: implement a system-wide regulatory measure in line with the national specifics (i.e. from the US accreditation concept, the CEE countries, as a rule, adopted only assessment against threshold standards, leading to approval/accreditation; the misunderstandings and confusion stemming from the foreign expert's language of theory may have made the task no easier for those muddling through the quality assurance issues in implementing newly devised quality assurance schemes in the CEE countries. This stage balances between national needs for assistance in quality assurance and misunderstandings and confusion stemming from the foreign expert that is called by the authors of the chapter as being *symbolic* (Kohoutek: 279).

In the mid-1990s, implementation of quality assurance policy in the CEE countries changed *from symbolic to political and administrative* steps: the quality assurance agencies that had been created; minimal quality standards have been settled. According to F.A. Van Vught, the implementation of these measures resulted in establishing an institutional quality compliance culture (Van Vught, 1989). The initiation of the Bologna Process agendas such as structured study has made an impact on the implementation of CEE quality assurance practices, making them increasingly time-consuming and labour intensive, due to the necessity to accredit every new degree program. It is evident that the preference in all the Central and Eastern European countries for accreditation rather than quality assessment alone occurred because, at the time of transition, a priority was to establish some sort of quality control for the higher education sector

The adoption of the ESG guidelines for quality assurance agencies, which, if fully implemented, will put the agencies under the obligation to undergo periodic external reviews and keep to accountability standards factor into the quality assurance policies of the CEE agencies, making them more "*experimental*" than ever before. The hypothesis of the authors of the chapter is checked by comparing the activity of quality assurance agencies from five countries: Latvia, Hungary, Poland, the Slovak Republic, and the Czech Republic, with the support of five variables (objectives, control, areas, procedures, uses) brought to the foreground by Perellon (Perellon: 2005). A thorough analysis shows the primacy of the application of accountability-oriented evaluation for the accreditation/approval concept, as suggested by the agencies' scope of activities (areas) and procedures applied (based on the general quality assurance model), and publication of results (uses), with taints referring to the models in Latvia and Poland.

The syntheses carried out so far have shown that the ESG implementation process on the agenda of quality assurance of the Bologna Process mainly suggests the fact that it is an open method of coordination and a means of persuasion on ESG implementation governance except for the cases when there is a better alternative. At the same time, knowledge on the ESG implementation process is generic and has a low prescriptive level, which makes the ESG implementation process open to local interpretations, as well as the possibility to alter it by enabling the lower level stakeholders, which is essential for the success of ESG implementation. Last but not least, considering the indivisibility, responsibility and confidence in the implementation process, the ESG implementation, as any policy implementation, has to determine a demonstration of the responsibility procedures of any agency assuming the enforcement of the implementation programme. Unfortunately, the syntheses referring to the study of implementation suggests little on the success and difficulty individual agencies face at the time of ESG enforcement. For this reason, in the latter part of

the book we will make a comparative analysis of national agencies expertise in certain CEE countries (Latvia, Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic, and Slovakia).

In 2005, Latvia adopted the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the Higher Education Area* (ESG), elaborated by ENQA and its partners. The Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre (HEQEC) that became a foundation in 2004, is the institution concerned with strategies to assure quality in Latvia. This institution seeks not only to assure active participation of this country to shaping the *European Higher Education Area*; it also stresses the particularity of this participation, which has been brought to the foreground by the three objectives pursued during the ESG implementation process: assessing Latvian programmes and institutions with the support of mixed experts (Western, Baltic and Latvian) in a wider European context (due to Western experts); assessing Latvian programmes and institutions in accordance with similar regional experience (due to Baltic experts); ensuring that assessment is carried out in accordance with the Latvian standards and regulations (due to native experts) (Agnese Rusakova, Andrejs Rauhvargers: 2009) .

At the same time, the benefits of using international experts are obvious for the particularity of the Latvian system of assuring quality and consist of transparency, international credibility and “European dimension”. These are strong arguments for a national debate with employers, parents, other interested individuals and the society in general. This model has also diminished the involvement of the state in a higher education system with strong personal connection amongst which finding a free independent expert for each field of study was pretty complicated. From this point of view, the positive experience in Latvia could be interesting for other countries aiming at introducing periodical assessments with the involvement of foreign experts.

In the current quality assurance system in Latvia, external quality assurance of institutions and/or programmes is carried out in a cyclic manner according to the ESG 2.7 Standard. After the first round of accreditation ended in 2002, each programme and institution has to be accredited every six years. The year 2007 marked the end of the second cycle of programme and higher education institutions accreditation. This country has implemented the ESG almost to the full with few exceptions referring to: *ESG 3.5 Standard*, yet the HEQEC website provides detailed information on the HEQEC orientation and a detailed description of the applied methodology; *ESG 3.8 Standard*, HEQEC does not currently subcontract or externalise the organisation of the assessment process for activities provisioned in the statutes.

In the conclusions, the authors of the survey show that the Latvian ESG implementation model is facing new challenges important for the future. Some formal requirements of the existing accreditation framework need to be reconsidered. For instance, “the academic community is considering the idea to introduce the accreditation of a department, rather than of personalities” (Agnese Rusakova, Andrejs Rauhvargers: 2009, 110). The good collaboration with stakeholders provides many opportunities to developed activities of HEQEC quality assurance. An example in point refers to different assessments, less traditional types of studies, such as distance learning, part time and part time intensive studies. An important issue is the acknowledgement of Lifelong Learning and its corresponding insertion in the existing academic system. At the same time, it is necessary to substantially improve the assessment of the results obtained after the study of a professional programme related to the requirements of labour market.

From the point of view of the institutional framework in the QA field, in Hungary, together with the Hungarian Accreditation Committee (HAC), established in 1992 and reformed in 2005 as an independent national body of experts assessing quality in education, research, and artistic activities in higher education, the Hungarian Ministry of Education and Culture and the Higher Education Institutions (the Higher Education and Scientific Council and the Hungarian Rectors’ Conference) have definite responsibilities.

From the point of view of the ESG implementation process, the HAC responsibility is not to assess the availability of QA assessment models but rather with checking if the QA system of an institution leads to a higher quality of education and research and services activities. HAC assesses an institution on three levels. First, the HAC Accreditation Guidelines for institutional accreditation comprise the indicators for an internal system of quality assurance that should be covered irrespective of the type of institution. Secondly, each external assessment team includes a QA expert delegated by the HAC Quality Development Subcommittee, a body required by law. Finally, a member of this subcommittee controls the report of the external team confronting it with the institutional chart and can alter the report before final approval and accreditation in the HAC plenary meeting (Christina Rosznyai: 2009)

Within the eight year assessment cycle, HAC provides QA assessment from the point of view of the institution, study programmes and other educational forms in a system *ex-ante* – institutional (new institutions and new faculties), programme (bachelor and masters) and other educational forms (doctoral schools at universities, professorial positions) and in an eight year system *ex-post* – institutional (institutions and their faculties), programme (degree programme) and other educational forms (doctoral schools).

From the point of view of the ESG implementation process results, we have to say that HAC was among the first European QA agencies to undergo an external evaluation by an international panel. In spring 2008, a second review was conducted to comply with ESG and for continued ENQA membership. External experts have considered that HAC fully conforms to five out of the eight second level ESG standards and six out of the eight third level ESG standards. Their proposals mainly focused on ESG 2.3, 2.4, 2.8, 3.4 and 3.6.

The achievement of these standards has to be related with opportunities and challenges for HAC. They are expressed around three main aspects: overregulation of higher education and HAC; an unstable legal environment; and the HAC resources. Many of these challenges, as well as many aspects relating to them are common to several countries at this stage of implementing the Bologna Process. Some, such as an excessive regulation, can be an issue mainly persisting in Central and Eastern European educational systems.

Nevertheless, the commitment of all interested parties in higher education for ESG implementation is expressed, as shown in the gradual ESG adoption by all higher education institutions. The HAC external assessment report tests the way these organisations work according to the European standards out of which the majority were HAC main principles for a great part of its history. Currently, the main opportunity for higher education in Hungary and HAC in particular is the fact that changes needed to keep up with alteration in the European Higher Education Area and the Bologna Process were initiated long time ago and the actions started to implement the ESG are no longer numerous and are not the most difficult.

In Poland, there are two main accreditation systems: the state system represented by the *State Accreditation Committee (PKA)* that started its activity in January 2002, and the “academic” system represented by the academic accreditation committees for different groups of study programmes, usually of a certain type, provided by higher education institutions. The academic committees of university accreditation represented by the Academic School Rectors’ Conference (CRASP) cooperate with the *State Accreditation Committee*. Many of these committees were drawn up before the establishment of the *State Accreditation Committee* (Ewa Chmielecka; 2009).

Thus, the process of ESG implementation in Poland has to be considered from a double perspective: state – PKA is a state institution and its office belongs to the Ministry of Science and Higher Education; academic – represented by the ten academic accreditation committees.

The Ministry established the PKA and is the main recipient of its findings. PKA reports to the ministry its opinions and conclusions on: establishing universities, granting the universities with the right to provide higher education in specific study structures or depending

on the levels of education, establishing faculties within higher education institutions located in other localities, assessing the quality of the programmes provided in certain study structures, assessing the quality of training systems, and conformity of higher education.

The ten academic accreditation committees that legally are non-governmental bodies offer national-level accreditation for Bachelor programmes (*licencjat/inżynier*) and the Master degree (*magister*). Their evaluation standards are generally more demanding than the *State Accreditation Commi.* Academic accreditation is voluntary and it takes place every three to five years. The accreditation procedures adopted by all the committees are very similar, although they can differ in some details, and assume certain steps: appointment of expert groups to develop specific standards and criteria for assessing the quality of education for specific fields of studies; application of a HEI unit offering course in a given field of studies for accreditation of this field; establishment of an evaluation panel to conduct a comprehensive review and assessment of a field of studies offered at a specific higher education institution; a review of the report at a plenary session of the Committee and the taking of the accreditation decision.

As far as the ESG implementation stage is concerned, even if in Poland there are the aforementioned two accredited systems, there have been substantial progresses at all levels. By analysing the elements of each ESG standard level, one can notice that although both accreditation systems meet these standards, they do it differently, while sometimes there are contradictory situations with no solution for the time being. For instance, Point 2.7 Periodic Reviews, PKA cycles last for six years, while in the case of the *Foundation for the Promotion and Accreditation of Economic Studies* (FPAKE), one of the ten accreditation committees, the first accreditation is granted for three years and subsequent accreditations for five years.

There are still major challenges for the ESG implementation process that Polish stakeholders have to face.

In the near future, all higher education institutions in Poland will have PKA accreditation and it is likely that the number of institutions willing to have a special distinction will accede with difficulty to the FPAKE accreditation through an attractive method. However, the FPAKE authorities are aware of the fact that limiting its operations to Poland would finally lead to losing its current position as compared to agencies enrolled in the European Register that may enter the accreditation market in this country. Yet the greatest challenge in the coming years will be adopting accreditations to the National Framework Qualifications standards ongoing in Poland considering the design of curricula using instruments based on results of learning – knowledge, skills and attitudes – is still new.

Accreditation of the degree programmes in Slovakia is defined by the Higher Education Act as a process in the context of which the Accreditation Commission (AC), at the request of a higher education institution, assesses its capacity to implement a degree programme (Act of 2002). Based on the standpoint of the AC, the Ministry of Education of the Slovak Republic makes a decision granting the right of the higher education institution to provide the academic degree corresponding to the accredited curriculum. The objects of accreditation are: degree programmes and award scientific-teaching degrees of docent and professors. The Minister of Education may ask for complex accreditation to be performed even prior to expiry of the six-year period (J. Jurkovic: 2009).

In 2006 – 2008, all public higher education institutions, all state higher education institutions, and one of the private higher education institutions have been assessed by the European University Association. The higher education institutions prepared self-evaluation reports according to the same standards, and subsequently underwent a peer review by the EUA working group. The final reports by the individual higher education institutions identified strengths and weaknesses of the institutions and recommended actions to be taken. The project was initiated by the higher education institutions and financed by the Ministry of

Education of the Slovak Republic, under the condition that the higher education institutions should publicise their final reports. At the same time, a Sectoral Report was developed, which gives an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the higher education system in the Slovak Republic as a whole (J. Jurkovic: 2009, 175).

Concerning the ESG implementation, at present time, it is not the primary aim of the AC's work to improve or assess the internal system of quality assurance of higher education institutions, but AC is strongly involved in the external assessment of higher education institutions. This fact leads to an interconnection between the internal quality assurance instruments of the institution and the external assessment of quality by the AC (J. Jurkovic: 2009, 175). There is an interconnection between public structures represented by the Ministry of Education and higher education institutions and AC as an independent QA assessment structure concerning the definition of assessment criteria (of public competence) and the assessment procedures (of private competence). Implementation of the recommendations is rather an internal affair of the higher education institution, and the purpose of the recommendations is to sustain the results achieved in research and educational activities until the next complex accreditation. Generally speaking, the present setting of the rules on external quality assurance is compatible with ESG Standards 2.1-2.8. However, some of the arrangements, including those pertaining to the work of the AC, have a special setting for historical reasons, and are not fully compatible with the ESG. At present, there is a joint project with the AC of the Czech Republic, which includes cooperation in preparing for an external review against ESG standards.

When analysing the Slovak experience in ESG implementation from the perspective of the relation between opportunities and challenges, it will be necessary to mention certain aspects that have to be considered in the future: the question of developing internal quality assurance mechanisms for higher education institutions; introducing a system for monitoring and improving them in the context of the external system for quality assurance. There is a need to reassess the present conditions in order to better respond to the missions and tasks of institutions, especially in the case of professionally-oriented higher education institutions; it is necessary to refocus on the assessment criteria, which are currently aimed at fulfilment of minimum standards, to account for continual improvement of institutional quality processes, monitoring student progress, and harmony between the aims of degree programmes and student achievements. The status of the AC and its financing should be given further consideration, as should be the relation between the AC and higher education institutions, and between the AC and the Ministry, particularly as concerns potential conflicts of interest of the Commission's members impacting on the independence of the Commission's procedures.

Evaluation of the quality of higher education institutions in the Czech Republic, in line with international developments, is part of the *Long-Term Plan for Educational, Scientific, Research, Development, Artistic and Other Creative Activities of Higher Education Institutions for 2006-2010* (Long-Term Plan). The Accreditation Commission, as the agency legally responsible for external quality assurance, is in charge with the accreditation process. Its responsibilities are clearly defined in its founding acts in 1998. With the expenses covered from the budget of the Ministry, the AC is composed of twenty-one members, appointed by the Czech government on the basis of a proposal by the Minister. To prevent conflicts of interests, the Act requires that the members of the AC should not be academic officials (H. Šebkova: 2009, 210).

The AC working programme includes the evaluation of private higher education institutions, faculties of public higher education institutions (the first evaluation of a whole public higher education institution was planned for the second half of 2008) and of accredited activities provided by both public and private higher education institutions with the aim to provide recommendations for improvement (pp 207-208). The activities developed by the AC can be as

follows: evaluation of higher education institutions; elaboration of standpoints on applications for accreditation; elaboration of standpoints on applications for granting state permission; elaboration of standpoints on the establishment/division of faculties, for setting the type of higher education institutions; preparation of documents and conceptual materials; collaboration with external partners at both national and international level; implementation of the Bologna Process principles, namely ENQA standards (H. Šebkova: 2009, 212).

As far as ESG implementation is concerned, The AC's 2007 annual report states that the AC is committed to the ESG principles with a view to gaining full ENQA membership, contingent on successfully undergoing the ESG review, the granting of which entitles the AC to be included in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). The way in which its members are selected, and also its composition, are considered an adequate guarantee of the AC's independence from any "third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders" (ENQA, 2005) that might influence the outcomes of quality assurance processes (expert panel's conclusions and recommendations).

From the point of view of meeting the *ESG standards for quality assurance agencies*, considering that AC is funded by the ministry with public money, not all needs are covered for the functional needs of the institution, which makes it vulnerable to meet the ESG 3.4 Standard, claiming financial autonomy of assessment agencies. As far as the *Implementation of ESG Regarding External Quality Assurance* is concerned, AC has met most standards with few taints. Even though the elements of the external review processes correspond to the ESG 2.4. Standard, the relevant ESG principles have been implemented only partly (H. Šebkova: 2009, 223) Also, if the AC's regulations on publishing reports on external quality evaluation, and the easy accessibility of the reports, are fully in harmony with the ESG 2.5 Standard, the structure and content of the reports sometimes differ significantly, as well as their style and tone. Even though the ESG 2.7 Standard is met, however it is not possible to argue that the evaluation of accredited activities and the evaluation of institutions are dynamic and continuing processes with the recurring review defined in advance.

Discussing about constraints and weaknesses of the QA system in the Czech Republic, external evaluators of the system consider that the strength of the Czech higher education quality assurance is that "it is a mature system with widespread participation among Czech academics" (File et al., 2006) and positively assess the AC activity "for a regular and recurring review of programmes". Practically, two strong points of the QA Czech system can be distinguished: the high level transparency of the AC's procedural criteria, which are publicly available on the AC's website and the international cooperation of the AC.

Out of the weaknesses of the QA system in the Czech Republic mentioned in the OECD assessment report in 2006, we remind the following: the composition of the AC's work groups in terms of the representation of employers, students and other stakeholders is not optimal; it is criticised that the AC's judgements are made on the basis of inputs rather than outputs, and that the accreditation process focuses mostly on personnel and material resources (i.e. input-oriented indicators such as numbers of professors, available facilities, etc.), not taking into consideration "the wider scope of institutional performance such as institutional management and governance and student support services; low diversification of the Czech tertiary education system, to which the accreditation procedures currently in operation contribute (H. Šebkova: 2009, 227-228).

The challenges and the agenda that the AC faces can be derived from the recommendations of the OECD experts and from the AC's self-evaluation: the activities must be more effective and create space for discussion of conceptual issues; the need for diversification of tertiary education; the consultation of the stakeholders outside of higher education in the selection of Commission members; opportunity to facilitate the development of internal quality assurance processes; shift between accreditation of degree programmes and the accreditation of institutions ; the variety of institutional approaches to internal evaluation

should be considered an opportunity for the future; putting greater focus on conceptual work and policy objectives for quality assurance development along with wider consideration and/or the dissemination of examples of good practice.

Following John Brennan's (1999) argument on the lack of attention paid to the institutional dimension in the body of literature on quality, and, importantly, the lack of empirical evidence on implementation of the ESG at institutional level, thus pointing to a "black box" in the sense of factual knowledge of the corresponding policy processes, the last part of the book comprises two case studies from the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, Czech Republic. Chapter 9 comprises details on the implementation of the ESG by UWB, while Chapter 10 sets the case of UWB implementation of the ESG in the context of the university's policy, learning from participation in three projects oriented at quality improvement.

Going through the experience of Latvia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic in the field of the ESG implementation, we can draw the conclusion that the adoption of ESG in 2005 can hardly be regarded as a supranational policy initiative of the type that blows away without making any impact at all. These were followed by the elaboration of rules qualifying agencies to be listed in the *European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education*, based again on a review against ESG. ESG implementation is likely to have achieved a reasonably high position on the agendas of agencies whose activities centre on assuring higher education quality primarily within state or federal border. At the same time, we may say that the quality assurance agencies in Latvia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic are generally compatible with ESG, with contextual variations of national quality assurance practices. Although the ESG experimental implementation pattern makes room for contextual interpretations by implementing actors, it is not unreasonable to expect certain adjustments to agencies' quality assurance practices.

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